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Ratings

Historical

The Yosemite Decimal System originated at Tahquitz, and the following climbs were used as the standards to define the scale. For each climb, I've also listed the consensus rating from Mountainproject (in 2015), which shows that there has been quite a bit of inflation in the ratings over the years, mainly at the low end of the scale — nobody wants to say they climb 5.0 these days.

Historical definition of the YDS, and inflation of ratings

5.0	The Trough	FA 1936	modern 5.4
5.1	Fingertip Traverse	FA 1936	modern 5.4
5.2	Frightful Variation of the Trough	FA 1944	modern 5.2
5.3	East Lark	FA 1950	modern 5.5
5.4	Angel's Fright	FA 1936	modern 5.6
5.5	Ski Tracks	FA 1947, 1957	modern 5.6, 5.9
5.6	Sahara Terror	FA 1942	modern 5.7
5.7	Fingertrip	FA 1946	modern 5.7
5.8	Mechanic's Route	FA 1937	modern 5.8R
5.9	Open Book	FFA 1952	modern 5.9

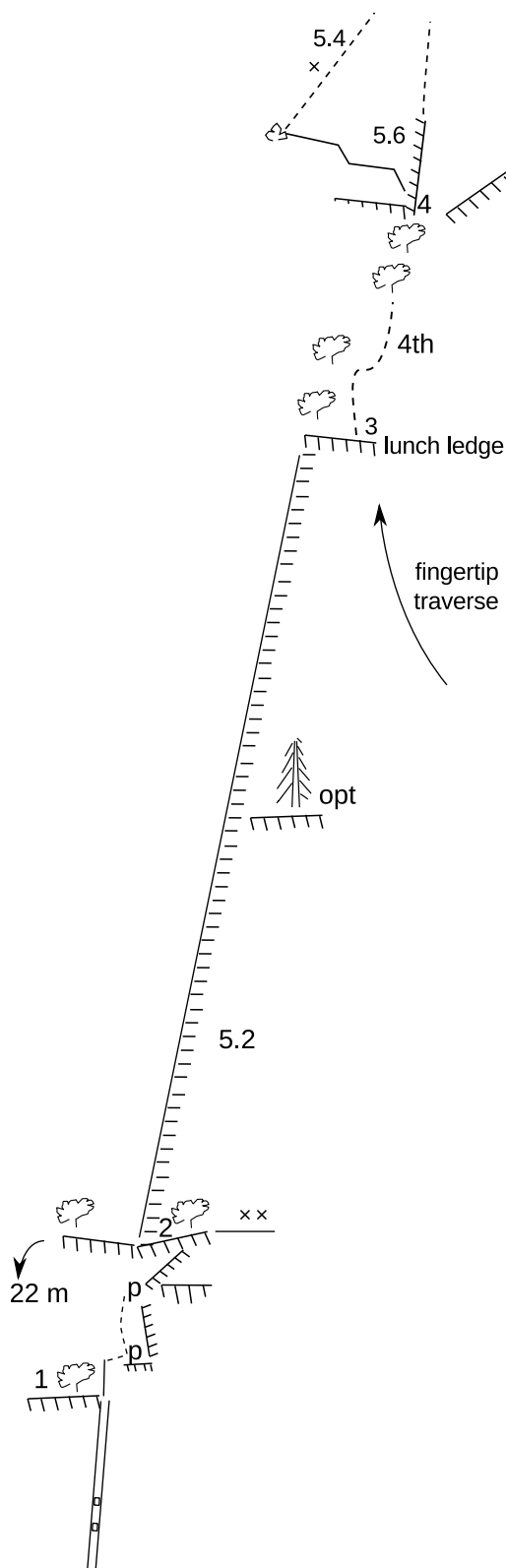
Evaluating ratings from a guidebook

When depending on a guidebook for information about the difficulty of a climb, take into account both the popularity of the climb and the date of its first ascent. Old and lesser-known climbs often retain their historical ratings, which can be extremely sandbagged by modern standards.

For example, Summit magazine did a big spread on Tahquitz in 1960, which you can find scans of online. They describe Northeast Farce as 5.3 and White Maiden's Walkway as 5.1. Having done these two climbs, I would agree that Northeast Farce is a couple of grades harder than the Maiden. But the 2001 edition of the Vogel-Gaines guidebook rates these climbs as 5.3 and 5.4, respectively — as if the Maiden were the *harder* climb. What has probably happened is that because the Maiden is one of the most popular climbs on the rock, there has been pressure to inflate its rating. Since almost nobody does Northeast Farce, it retains the rating that was assigned when it was first climbed in 1954.

Another good example of this phenomenon is two obscure climbs on the inaccessible south face of Suicide Rock, named Minor and Spring Cleaning. The first ascent of Minor is lost in the mists of time, while Spring Cleaning had its FA in 1970. Several people who I've done these climbs with agree that they are equal in difficulty, but Vogel and Gaines list them as 5.1 and 5.6.

Angel's Fright (5.6)



This short and popular climb was the original definition of 5.4 on the Yosemite Decimal Scale. Most of the climb follows a long, uniform left-facing dihedral. The start is almost directly above Lunch Rock. Pro to 2". FA 1936, Jim Smith and William Rice.

P1. This short pitch goes up an off-width chimney that is a little too narrow to insert your whole body in but a little too wide for a thigh jam. Two chock-stones provide convenient stances and natural pro, as well as helping to confirm that this is the chimney you were looking for. 5.5

P2. This short crux pitch consists of steep face climbing with possibly bewildering routefinding. Start up a ragged crack, then exit right with a balancey move to a small ledge with a fixed pin. Move back left and continue to a second piton, which is in bad condition and starting to split in half. Climb to the right up a ramp to a big belay ledge with two trees. The left-hand tree is festooned with slings. 5.6

P3. Cruise up the big dihedral that forms the backbone of the climb. Most of the climbing is easy 5th class, but at the end a steep 5.5 headwall stands between you and lunch ledge. 5.5 m

P4. Climb up from the middle of the ledge. (Linking P4 and P5 will give unacceptable rope drag unless you plan carefully.) 4th class.

Var 1: For a more direct but harder route, step around a corner to the right and then continue up.

P5. Move up and left on a flake and then tiptoe along it as it continues around a corner. This is easily protected with cams. (Do not follow the ramp lower down.) At a small tree, head up a 5.4 slab with an orange bolt.

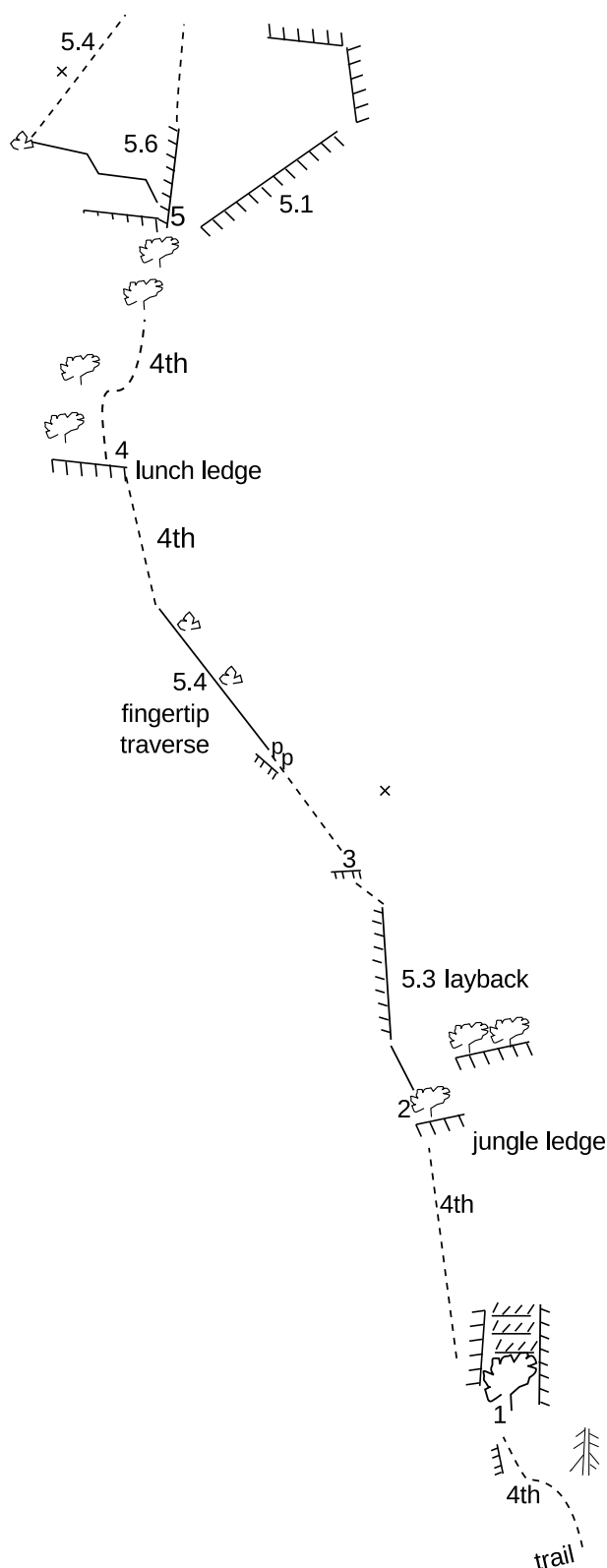
Var 1: Head right into a 5.1 gully, then turn left at an overhang.

Var 2: Climb a very thin finger crack, punctuated with pin scars. 5.6

Walk uphill to the standard friction descent.

Ben Crowell, github.com/bcrowell/tahquitz

Fingertip Traverse (5.4)



An easy Tahquitz classic, this was the original climb used to define 5.1 on the Yosemite Decimal Scale. Most of the climbing is 4th or easy 5th class, but the namesake traverse is more like 5.4 by modern standards. Hike up to Lunch Rock and then head to the right along the trail. The first pitch starts directly from the trail, near a truncated tree, with the first belay easily visible. Pro to 2". FA 1936, Jim Smith, Bob Brinton, Arthur Johnson, and William Rice.

P1. Scramble up to a large double oak tree in an alcove, the infamous "ant tree." Anchor at the lower part of the tree to avoid stirring up the ants. 30 m, 4th class.

P2. Move up the left side of the alcove's left wall, where it is shortest, stemming against the opposite wall and then against two branches of the upper tree. Avoid the main trunk to keep from stirring up the ants. Protect with a 0.3" cam (blue C4) in a small finger crack before moving onto the rock. (This can also be done by climbing higher up the tree, or by climbing the broken overhang at the back of the alcove. These options can be protected with a 2" cam in the crack in the left corner.) Continue up easy terrain. 30 m, 4th and easy 5th class except for the committing move out of the tree.

P3. Climb a right-facing dihedral with good protection and stances. Near the top of the dihedral, a short section requires laybacking (5.3). Belay at a tiny ledge on a slab (small gear). 30 m

P4. Go around a corner and traverse along a finger-width crack, smearing on the sloping face below, 5.4. Protect using the trees and gear 1-2" and smaller. Continue up 4th-class terrain to Lunch Ledge (gear belay). Here the route joins up with Angel's Fright. 40 m

P5. Climb up from the middle of the ledge. (Linking P5 and P6 will give unacceptable rope drag unless you plan carefully.) 4th class.

Var 1: For a more direct but harder route, step around a corner to the right and then continue up.

P6. Move up and left on a flake and then tiptoe along it as it continues around a corner. This is easily protected with cams. (Do not follow the ramp lower down.) At a small tree, head up a 5.4 slab with an orange bolt.

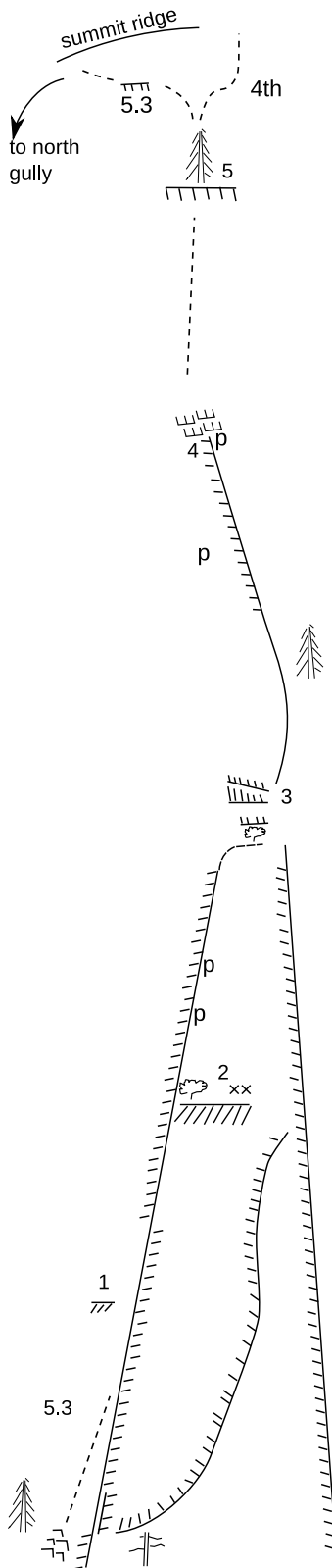
Var 1: Head right into a 5.1 gully, then turn left at an overhang.

Var 2: Climb a very thin finger crack, punctuated with pin scars. 5.6

Walk uphill to the standard friction descent.

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Northeast Face, East Variation (5.6)



This climb is in the middle of the northeast face, to the left of the Larks and to the right of El Grandote. A prominent inverted “Y” is formed by right-facing dihedrals, and this variation heads up its left fork. Approach via the North Side Trail. The “Y” is difficult to see through the trees from the trail, but the north face lies below the prominent gendarme at the top of the Larks, and this climb is on the left side of that face. A fun route that is easily protected and can be climbed on a Saturday morning without being in a conga line. A possible negative is that there is a certain sameness to a lot of the climbing on pitches 2-4. Sustained 5.5-5.6 climbing on pitches 2 through 5. Pro to 3”, with a 4” cam repeatedly coming in handy. FA Don Wilson and Royal Robbins, 1954.

P1. Climb flakes to the left of the dihedral, enter the left-facing part of the dihedral briefly, and belay at a small ledge. Ignore the bolts to the right, which are for the slab climb Grace Slick. 60 m, 5.3.

P2. Continue up the crack. Insert into the main right-facing part of the dihedral and climb a wide (knee jam) crack. End at a bolted anchor on a huge ledge. 5.5

P3. Continue up the dihedral, toeing in to a thin crack at the corner, to a series of overlaps at the crotch of the “Y.” Traverse past a small tree, then move up through 5.6 broken terrain to a belay. The crux of the climb is at the end of this pitch and the beginning of the next one. Vogel and Gaines describe a variation that swings around farther to the right, but I’ve heard it’s harder. Higher up is an alternative belay at a tree around a corner to the right, but this is a poor choice due to rope drag.

P4. Head up the stem of the “Y” toward overhangs. Stay in the dihedral, and don’t be lured off route by the fixed piton above and to the left. Belay as close as possible to the overhangs in order to complete the following pitch with a 60 meter rope. A fixed pin can be backed up with 3” or 4” cams.

P5. Pull through gaps in a set of steep blocks and irregular overhangs. The moves are strenuous but easily protected, with big holds. After this the climbing gets much easier for the rest of the route. Head for a shady belay at a pine tree on a big ledge. 60 m

P6. Continue to the right up 4th class terrain to the summit ridge, or traverse a delicate 5.3 ledge to the left for more direct insertion into the north gully.

Ben Crowell, github.com/bcrowell/tahquitz

Northeast Farce (5.6 PG13)

Warning: I haven't done P1.

This climb may owe its unpopularity to the lack of appropriate pro on P3, which is the reason I've given it a "PG13" rating. The route is located on the extreme left corner of the northeast face, at a gigantic right-facing dihedral that dominates this entire area of the rock. FA Don Wilson and Jerry Gallwas, 1954. Gear to 3".

P1. Start up a small right-facing dihedral to the left of the El Grandote arch. Exit early to the left in order to get out from under a house-sized boulder looming above. Continue past two pine trees, to a ledge on top of the boulder. Class 4.

P2. Climb the humongous dihedral to a belay at a small forked deciduous tree with rap rings. The tree is pretty small and should be backed up with gear if it is to be used as a belay anchor.

P3. Continue up the dihedral. To the right is a 2" crack that forms the the money pitch of El Whampo. Beyond that crack is a huge, fractured flake. Higher up, the climbing in the dihedral becomes much more strenuous, 5.6, turning into more of an off-width crack with sloper holds. A chockstone festooned with old, UV-damaged slings seems unfortunately to be too deeply wedged and buried now to allow the slings to be replaced. Continue to the ledge, which is the first highly prominent one visible above the belay. A 3" or 4" cam can be placed before starting across the ledge. Half-way across the ledge is an old fixed pin. After the ledge fades out, continue a short distance across 5.5 slab to the El Whampo crack, then across a little more slab, 5.6, to the big crack that forms the continuation of Northeast Farce. Between the fixed pin and the El Whampo crack, no other protection is available, and if the old, rusty pin were to fail, the result would be a long 90-degree pendulum fall back into the dihedral.

P4. Climb 5.3 face up toward the roof. Turn right and begin traversing along a slab that is made more secure by the availability of underclings. A comfy belay is available at a little nook inside a dihedral (the top of El Dorado?).

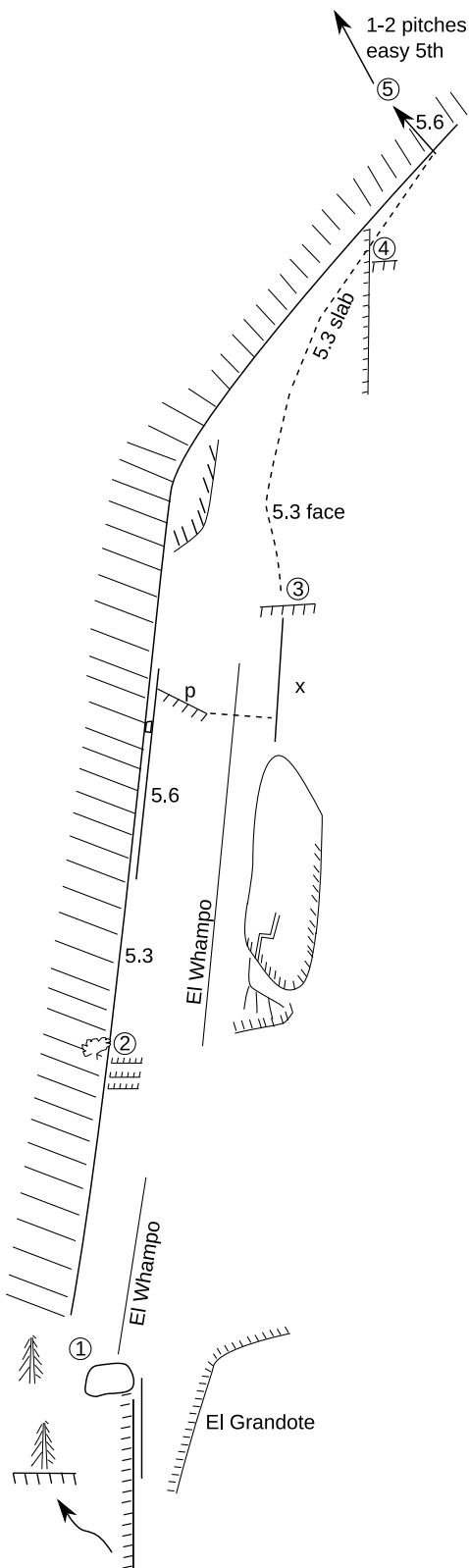
P5. Continue traversing and look for a weak spot at which to exit up through the roof. 5.6.

P6. Climb easy 5th class terrain to a big, comfy belay at a squat pine tree.

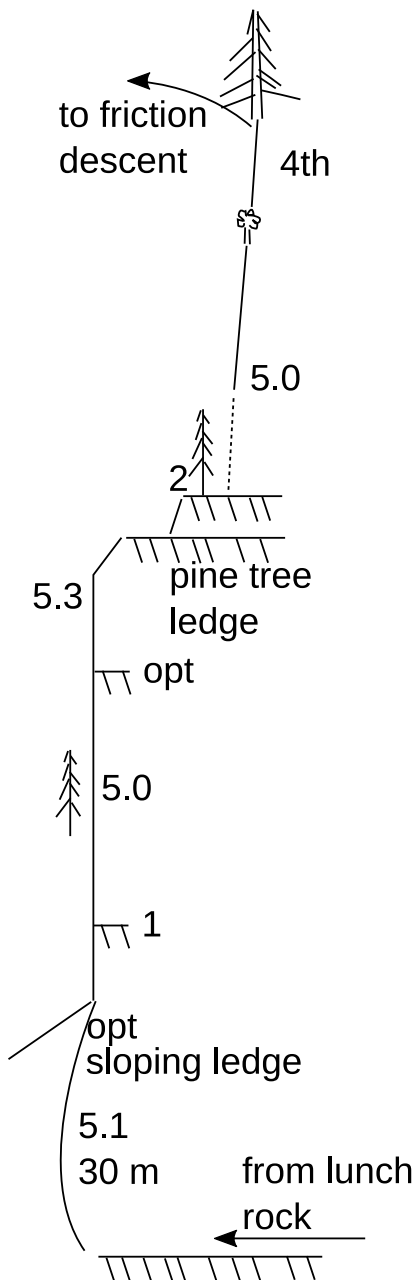
P7. 4th class to the top of the rock.

Descend via the northeast gully.

Ben Crowell, github.com/bcrowell/tahquitz



The Trough (5.3)



This climb was originally used as a class 4 downclimb route off of Tahquitz. Later it served as the original definition of 5.0 on the Yosemite Decimal Scale, and with continuing grade inflation it has now come to be rated about 5.3. 3-5 pitches. Gear to 3", slings for trees. Singles of cams are enough. FA Jim Smith, Bob Brinton, and Z. Jasitas, 1936.

Approach: From the bottom end of the parking area at Humber Park, take the Ernie Maxwell trail and then turn left at the signpost for the climber's trail. Climb to Lunch Rock. Continue past Lunch Rock to the foot of Tahquitz Rock. Turn left, and crawl up through a tunnel behind a tree. Follow the ledge until it ends.

P1. Follow a crack up and around a corner to the left. Fingers and friction initially, then off-width. Pass through a large, sloping, triangular ledge and insert into the obvious trough. Belay at a small ledge on the right. 45 m

P2. Continue up the trough. Near the top is more difficult climbing including smearing and squeezing through a narrow gap. At the top, the trough steepens and ends. Move up and over to the right here, onto Pine Tree Ledge. 45 m.

P4. Climb a face a couple of feet to the right of the pine tree, aiming for the small oak tree that is visible against the sky. It's difficult to find gear placements here that aren't cracks behind flakes, but it is possible to sling a series of tiny trees. The slope moderates and turns into a gully. Beyond the oak tree is a short section of easy climbing which ends at a huge pine tree. 55 meters, 5.0 and 4th.

- From the pine tree, climb up class 2 slab to the left, staying on the crest of the ridge to avoid exposure and steeper slopes. About 60 meters from the pine tree, you reach an area of boulders and bushes (before the summit).

- The standard friction descent route (class 3) is on the south side of Tahquitz Rock. Descend a chimney behind a house-sized boulder. Zigzag down a series of ledges, then head for a double tree. Traverse slabs to get to the trail.

- Return on the climber's trail, staying close to the foot of the rock except to avoid the slabs near the bottom of the Ski Tracks area.

Ben Crowell, github.com/bcrowell/tahquitz

This is the longest route on the rock. On the first two pitches, rock quality is not as good as we normally expect at Tahquitz. Some of the belay ledges are littered with baseball- to cantaloupe-sized rocks. I have inadvertently kicked down rocks several times on this route, and have been hit in the face with a thumb-sized rock. I would avoid climbing this route below another party.

Approach: The Uneventful lies on the North Buttress, which is the one in between the Maiden Buttress and the Northeast Buttress. Immediately to the left are the Larks, and a clear visual landmark from the trail is the huge gendarme that lies at the top of the Larks. There are two gullies at the bottom of the North Buttress, and the Uneventful starts in the left one of these two, at a deep, shady alcove with azaleas growing in it.

P1. Above the start, the gully immediately splits into three forks. The middle fork is blocked by a steep headwall. Head up the right-hand fork, which curves around behind the headwall. A crux is formed by an overhang consisting of two tongue-shaped flakes. I couldn't tell whether the bottom tongue was firmly wedged under the top one or if it was attached to anything, so it seemed safer to detour left rather than powering through the overhang. Continue up the gully as the climbing gets a little easier, and finish at a comfy belay at a huge, truncated pine tree. 5.6, 60 m

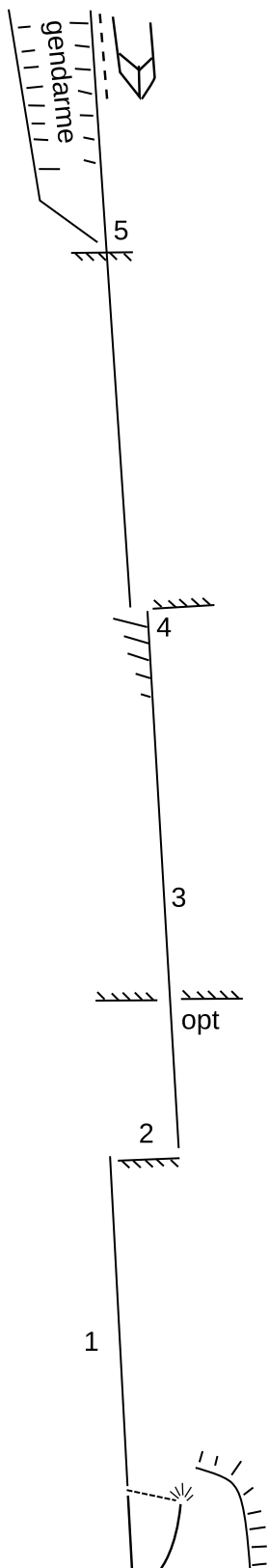
P2. The gully starts to dissipate, and the climbing gets easier. 5.4, 60 m

P4. Climb a cruxy overhanging arch where it meets the wall of the dihedral. To protect this move, an old fixed pin in the wall can be backed up with a small cam (black tricam) in the overhang itself. Continue up the dihedral to a big ledge near two big, distinctive trees: one dead and one shaped like a “J.” 5.6, 35 m

P6. Escape the alcove by climbing up and left, then continue upward a little, 5.5. Wait for an easy traverse to appear on the left. Head left and continue along a long and nearly horizontal route, easy 5th class. The traverse ends at a sandy area near the saddle above the northwest gully descent route. Starting the traverse too early leads to more difficult (5.7) traversing and downclimbing into the gully at the top of the Larks. Once you're on the correct, easy traverse, the easy climbing is found by avoiding the temptation to turn upward.

Ben Crowell, github.com/bcrowell/tahquitz

West Lark (5.4)



A low-angle ascent up an obvious crack, with straightforward routefinding. A fall might mean hitting a ledge. The few harder moves are protectable. Comfy belays are scarce, so when you see one, use it. Pro to 2". Singles of cams should be enough for most leaders. FA Roy Gorin, J. Hudson, William Dixon, and Ellen Wilts, 1954.

The start lies at the extreme right side of the north face, just to the left of the north buttress. Approach via the North Side Trail, leaving the trail to approach the base of the climb by threading your way between talus piles. The gendarme near the top is the most visible landmark through the treetops.

To find the beginning of the climb, get up close and look for the obvious easy start in a recess, with the bush and short friction traverse shown in the topo. Nearby to the right is difficult or impossible climbing consisting of a left-facing dihedral ending in an overhang.

P1. Climb past an inconvenient bush and left a few feet across slab. (A direct start, to the left, is probably also possible, but I haven't tried it.) Insert into a crack and head up. ~ 35 m

P2. Continue up the crack to a ledge on the right. ~ 30 m

P3. Continue up through a gap in an overhang and belay above it. It is possible to belay below the overhang instead, but then it becomes difficult to do the next two pitches with a 60-meter rope. ~ 30 m

P4. Continue to a hanging belay next to a right-facing dihedral. The belay needs to be right near the overhang if P5 is to be possible with a 60-meter rope. 50 m

P5. Up to a ledge below a huge gendarme. 60 m

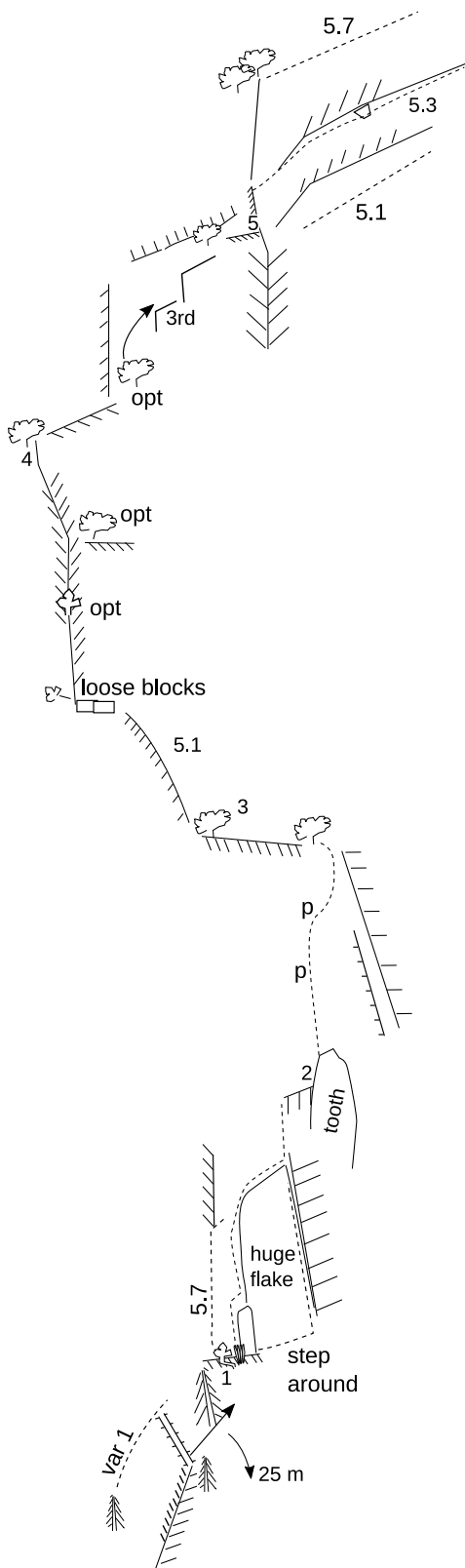
P6. Continue straight up, on the right side of the gendarme. Pass between the gendarme and its little sister, a rock shaped like the prow of a ship. Face and chimney climbing to the top.

Var 1: It is also possible to go to the left of the gendarme. Rope drag may be a problem, and the crux move may be difficult to protect without depending on bad rock.

Gain the summit ridge and head down left into the north gully descent route, or insert into the gully more directly by scrambling.

Ben Crowell, github.com/bcrowell/tahquitz

White Maiden's Walkway (5.4)



A Tahquitz classic. Difficult routefinding. The route ends not far below the summit of Tahquitz and is one of the longer routes on the rock. Start from the left side of the Maiden Buttress, which can be approached either from the North Side Trail or the Lunch Rock Trail. Pro to 3", or 4" for var 2 of P2. FA Jim Smith and Arthur Johnson, 1937.

P1. The obvious way up is a gully with pine trees in it. Scramble up class 4 rock to a belay at a dihedral. The first move is difficult; step left first using a hidden fingertip hold for balance, then mantle up into the crack. After the first pine tree, enter a gutter heading up and to the left, but then immediately exit the gutter to the right to avoid getting the rope snagged in brush. Continue past a big pine tree and belay at a small tree. 5.0 except for the initial 5.6 move.

Var 1: Start at a pine tree higher up to the left and climb the steep face. 5.4
P2. Traverse to the right, under branches and then over a saddle behind a boulder, and make an exposed step around with friction into a gutter. Protect with a #3 TCU. (It may be possible to bypass the friction move by downclimbing slightly, but I haven't tried it.) Head up the 5.0 gutter and watch for an exit to a large saddle on the right. A common mistake is to overshoot the saddle instead of exiting.

Var 1: A clean straight-in hand and foot crack just left of the small tree. 5.7

Var 2: A ragged fist- and off-width crack heading straight up from brush to the right of the belay. A fall near the start risks impalement on a dead tree. 5.6

P3. From the center of the saddle, head straight up toward a small tree. Near the second fixed pin, you run out of easy ways up, the only apparent option being a very difficult mantling move up to a small sloper hold. Instead, grope for a series of excellent holds that allow you to easily move up and to the right. Come back to the tree. Place gear to route the rope so as to avoid damaging the tree by dragging the rope over it. Continue left across the ledge to a belay at another tree. 5.4, 35 meters

P4. Climb 15 meters up a flake. As the flake levels out and disappears, look for a large, loose conch-shaped block close enough on the left to reach out and touch. Step across the two loose blocks and make a committing step around a corner to a stemming stance, then reach for a tree. Head up a 5.0 gully. 60 m, easy 5th class except for the step around.

P5. Traverse right toward another tree, but head upward before it. Before getting too close to the ceiling, go back to traversing along 3rd-class ledges and flakes. Gear belay in a one-inch crack in a right-facing dihedral in the big gully. class 3/4

P6. For the standard 5.3 finish, head 10 feet up the gully, then exit into a cave formed by a claustrophobic overhang. A large block is in the way. Move all the way out to the rightmost side of the block. Get your right foot up on a small step-stool, side-pull on a hold, and mantle up onto the block.

Either go down to the friction descent or go up and over the summit and come down the north gully.

Ben Crowell, github.com/bcrowell/tahquitz